

Ridin' Dirty

“GUNSLINGERS” OWN THE NIGHT

story and photos by Spc. Amanda Solitario

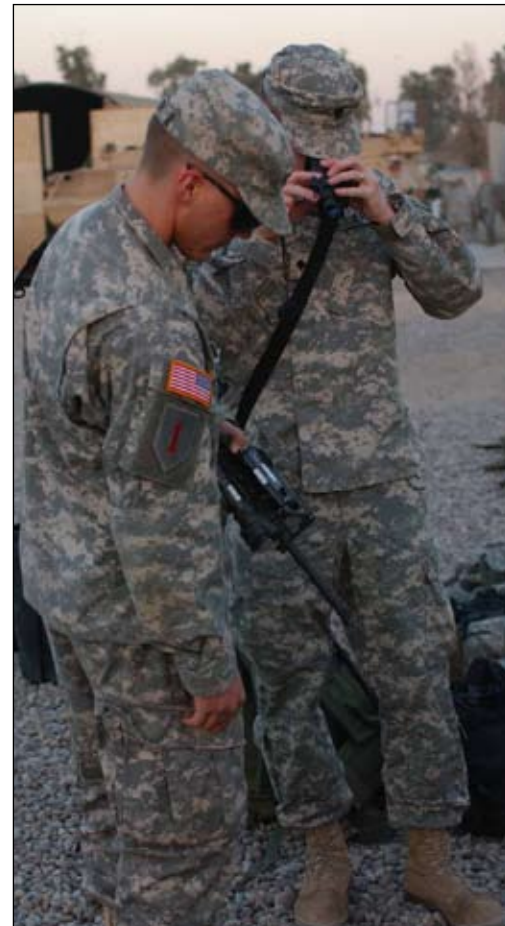


Sgt. Marshall Potts, a gunner with C. Co., 1st Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment, mounts his weapon on the top of the vehicle before heading for a night outside the wire.

LSA ANACONDA, Iraq—A nighttime chill begins to fill the air and as the last rays of daylight dwindle in the sky, the Soldiers of 1st Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment are just starting their day.

At the unit's motor pool, Soldiers from 4th Platoon, C. Company get geared up for another night on the road.

The 4th Platoon "Gunslingers" handle convoy security for Kellogg, Brown & Root contractors, and these Soldiers make it a priority to see that the precious military cargo gets from one base to the other—all across Iraq.



Spc. Raymond Martin (left), gunner C. Co., 1st Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment, and Spc. Brien Buckentine, a medic with the unit, inspect night vision equipment. Making sure the unit is prepared for the mission is an essential step in the operation.

The mission of the Gunslingers is more than a convoy escort. It is a major link in the overall fight to secure the future of Iraq, said Capt. Jeffery W. Jurand, company commander.

Jurand said that without the vital logistics that his Soldiers proudly protect, the maneuver forces and the Iraqi soldiers would not be able to continue their operations.

But the missions start long before the Soldiers hit the highways. There are battle drills, briefings, weapon and vehicle maintenance, and a lot of planning involved for one night outside the wire.

"If the horse isn't ready to run, we can't conduct our mission," said 1st Lt. Joshua O. Lehman, platoon leader for 4th Platoon and a native of Madera, Calif.

From meticulously polishing the windows of vehicles to fine-tuning the sights on the weapons, Lehman said the troops show up hours ahead of schedule to get everything just right.

After the final safety brief and one last practical exercise, the Soldiers load up and head out for a night of "Ridin' Dirty," as their platoon motto says.

Passing infantry foot patrols on their left and road-repairing engineers on their right, the Gunslingers push through with the supplies that will sustain those troops.

As the mix of military and civilian trucks make their way to the final destination, gunners watch the roads from their turrets while vehicle commanders call in assessments over the radios.

"You just never know what to expect," said Sgt. Marshall Potts, a gunner with the unit and a native of Texas.

Each Gunslinger has their own technique for staying focused and keeping their eyes open and on the road. For some it is handfuls of candy for a quick sugar rush, and for others, it is bottomless cups of coffee to get the caffeine pumping through the veins.



A Soldier breaks down his weapon in the early morning hours after returning from a convoy security mission. Before leaving the unit's motor pool after the completion of the mission, Soldiers disassemble equipment, perform vehicle inspections, and clean their weapons.

No matter how they do it, the vigilant Soldiers continuously scan their sectors for anything out of the ordinary, forever mindful of the civilians and supplies they are protecting.

The active duty unit from Fort Riley, Kan. runs all of their combat logistics patrols at night, and most of the Soldiers prefer it that way.

"It makes it a much more clean battlefield," Lehman said. "It is just us and the enemy."

The unit had completed several missions since their arrival in October without any enemy contact—until recently.

Lehman said the lead vehicle in one of his convoys was hit by an improvised explosive device, but fortunately, no injuries resulted.

The unit moved without hesitation to perform self-recovery on the downed vehicle and provide 360-degree security for the rest of the convoy. He said everyone knew their job, and executed flawlessly.

"We know that every time we are outside the wire the possibility exists that an IED detonation on the convoy can happen," said Sgt. 1st Class Tracy Newlin, platoon sergeant. "How we react to these situations is



As the sun sets at the motor pool, Soldiers prepare for the long night ahead of them.

everything."

Newlin, normally stationed in Kansas, said their reaction is the difference between the loss of a Soldier and completion of the mission.

Lehman said his platoon is determined not to let anything stand in their way when they are out on the road.

"We will accomplish the mission no matter the circumstances," Lehman said. "We often face KBR maintenance issues and other obstacles that might hinder our movement during the mission, but even so, we still accomplish the mission."

The vigor demonstrated by each Soldier is a direct reflection of the pride they have in their job, even if it is not their original military occupational specialty.

The platoon is comprised of mostly tankers, but the Soldiers had to trade in their tracked vehicles for Humvees when they arrived at Anaconda.

"These Soldiers understand their mission is unconventional, in terms of what they were trained to do," he said. "Even so, they are prepared to meet, close with, and destroy their enemies no matter what vehicles they are mounted on."

Although many of the troops in the unit admit they miss their tanks, they said they adapt and overcome to function in whatever capacity the military sees fit.

"We serve because we believe in our country and everything it stands for," Newlin said, adding that his Soldiers are completely dedicated to what they do over here.

He said the Soldiers in the unit are like a family with everyone counting on each other.

"Our morale is high when everybody is in good spirits, and the morale is low when someone in the platoon isn't happy," he said. "We share our feelings as would any family because of the trust we have in each other."

That trust and loyalty is important. It is what gets the unit through the long nights outside the base walls, he said.

The unit sometimes spends days away from the LSA while contractors offload the supplies from the trucks, and restocks them with cargo for the return trip. The Gunslingers take full advantage of the opportunity to experience life at other forward operating bases.

Many of the Soldiers head right to the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation facility to start up a game of ping-pong, which has become somewhat of a tradition for them.

Newlin said that after being on the road for so many hours, it takes awhile for the adrenaline to subside. Instead of going to sleep right away, they find a place to relax and unwind.

But when the sun comes up, the Soldier's heads are down on their pillows trying to squeeze in some much-needed rest before waking up and doing it all over again.

Although the job may seem demanding and tiring, the Gunslingers are always eager to get back out on the road.

"The hardest part of my job is not having a mission," said Spc. William Thomas, a driver in the unit.

Thomas said it is agonizing not knowing when the next mission will pop up. It is simply a waiting game until it is time for them to hop in their vehicles for another night of "Ridin' Dirty."



Kellogg, Brown & Root trucks line up inside C. Co., 1st Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment, motor pool for the convoy briefing. The unit provides convoy security for the civilian contractors transporting military cargo throughout Iraq.



Spc. Brien Buckentine, a medic with the unit, hops on the top of the Humvee to do some last minute checks. Buckentine checks the weapon's system and makes sure the turret is clean and operational.



Spc. Jon Nelson, an Armored Security Vehicle driver with the C. Co. 1-34th Armor Regiment, takes advantage of the sunlight to perform pre-combat checks. In just a few hours, as darkness sweeps over the post, the unit will be ready to roll out the gates.